

**Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*: A Portrait of Modern India****Shashikala Walmiki**

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**Abstract:** Arvind Adiga in his Booker prize winning novel “The White Tiger” gives a sardonic picture of modern india. Ever widening gap between the rich and poor, rural and urban, and the brutal reality of an economic system that allows a small minority to prosper at the expense of the silent majority; political culture of India, voting behaviour, social milieu, caste and culture conflict, superstition, social taboos, exploitation of underclass, Zamindari practice, emergence of Naxalism, unemployment especially in rural India, prostitution, master-servant relationship, nexus between the politicians, criminals and the police, mockery of education system, hollowness of Government's welfare schemes, poor medical services, harmful impact of scientific, technological and industrial development mark off the novel. The final impression of the novel is that it justifies every kind of trick to succeed in life. Balram Halwai, the protagonist and his rise from Munna to Ashok Sharma verifies this proposition. In the words of Prakash Bhadury, “The apparently didactic story of the novel exposes the stern reality and takes the glamour off the 'India shining' even though the author never envisioned it as a counter narrative. He divides India as 'India of Darkness' and 'India of Light. It contains some of the very astute observations about class divide and disempowerment in India.” Largely the novel gives an insight into the servant class and answers the questions such as “What keeps the millions of poor Indians work in servitude? And How stable is such system?” through the symbol of “Rooster Coop.” The present paper aims at giving Adiga's picture of India and also critically analyzes the authenticity and reality of the picture given by Adiga.

**Key Words:** Darkness, Light, Corruption, Rooster Coup, Reality, Authenticity

The novel is written in the epistolary form. The protagonist Balaram Halwai writes seven un-posted letters in seven nights to Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, on his listening to the announcement on radio of Jiabao's visit to India to learn why India is so good at producing entrepreneurs. So Balram presumes to tell him how to win power and influence people in the modern India. Balram's story is a tale of bribery, corruption, skullduggery, toxic traffic jams, theft and murder.

Arvind Adiga projects his novel *The White Tiger*, in the words of Ram BhavanYadav, “in an angry young man mode” and presents these aforementioned dark aspects of shining India to expose the other side of the ongoing developments and **corruption** in country. Even at the threshold of twenty first century, the old order has not yet changed though the new is already born. The novel accurately exposes contemporary India's political, economical, sociological, infrastructural scenario and social evils including caste system, prostitution, the problems of poor and labours, tortures and miseries in household of which women are subjected in day today life. The novel also exposes decline of religious values from all sphere of life in a derogatory and blasphemous ways.

The protagonist, Balram Halwai has come from what Adiga calls the Darkness - the heart of rural India - and manages to escape his family and

poverty by becoming chauffeur to a landlord from his village. Adiga has focused the Indian society through the discrimination of “Big Bellies and the small Bellies” (*The White Tiger* (TWT), 64). It is also about Urbanized India with its pangs of urbanization. India is shown as an emerging and shining country in the field of transport and communication, science and technology, medical services, industries, tourism etc. “The things are changing in India now, this place is going to be like America in ten years” (TWT, 89). But the fate of the country is in the hand of the ignorant, bastard masochistic politicians who always defunct the society by operating the power structure. The medical services as depicted in the novel are the symbol of utter social anarchy. The educational system is controlled by the “crowd of thugs and idiots” and Adiga named it ‘Jungle’

In the very beginning of novel, the narrator of novel is introduced as protagonist, servant, philosopher, entrepreneur, and *the white tiger*. Balram (school name of protagonist) was born in a small village named *Lakhamgargh* in the darkest heart of India, Dhanbad. Balram is son of a rickshaw puller. He is taken out of school by his family and compelled to work in a teashop. Balram as a child crushes coal and wipes dirty tables of tea stall; he nourishes the dream to escape from the darkness. His ambition inspires him to learn to drive car and in due course of time he becomes a

well trained driver. His fortune begins when he is hired by a landlord of his village as chauffeur for his newly arrived son and daughter-in-law from London. From behind wheel of the Honda City Balram first sees Delhi and here re-education of Balram begins to become rich like his master Ashok. The other fellow servants or drivers like Balram flick through pages of murder weekly; by engaging their conversations among them in trivial subject which result in balderdash. But Balram begins to see how tiger might escape his cage. He begins to machinate to remove Ashok, his master, from his way, kills him and flees away with his money. He thinks that it is essential for sure that successful man must spill a little blood on his way for going on the top. He finally murders his master and flees away with money to Bangalore and starts a new life there as business man.

In fact it is this concept of human beings bound in the cage that brings out the **central theme** of the novel revealing the situation wherein the poor people of India are like rooster in a basket. Nothing could be more bitter and ironical than the following remark: ".... Indians are the world's most honest people, like the prime minister's booklet will inform you?"

No. It's because 99.9 per cent of us are caught in the **Rooster Coop** just like those poor guys in the poultry market." (TWT, 175) He further adds; "Never before in human history have so few owed so much to so many, Mr. Jiabao. A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 percent – as strong, as talented as intelligent in every way – to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands, he will throw it back at you with a curse." (TWT, 175-176)

This **dominating theme** of the novel is all that the author aims at conveying to the readers, projecting India, the poor down-trodden people of India and the Indian landscape which he calls **darkness** as against the rich palaces of affluent people which are termed as **light**. The entire merit of the novel lies solely in its attempts at exposing the dark sides of India in contrast to the India of Light. **India of Light** with access to education, health care, transportation facilities, electricity, running water, hope, justice, is an emerging entrepreneurial power in the world surpassing China. This India is rapidly advancing in the field of science and technology, space, real estate, yoga and meditation, hotel and tourism industry, expansion of cities and mall culture. Delhi is adulated as Young America in India.

On the other hand, the **India of Darkness** is full of the underclass. In the novel, the voice of the underclass is strongly articulated and the novel attempts to give them proper recognition in the society. The novel is centred on Balram Halwai, a son of a rickshaw puller, destined to make sweets

becomes Ashok Sharma. His transformation from Munna—Balram Halwai—White Tiger—Ashok Sharma is the blue print for the rise of underclass. According to Krishna Singh, "Balram is the strong voice of underclass in which marginal farmers, landless labourers, jobless youths, poor, auto and taxi drivers, servants, prostitutes, beggars and unprivileged figure. The underclass is the result of our polity, bureaucratic set-up, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, caste and culture conflict, superstitions, social taboos, dowry practice, economic disparity, Zamindari system, corrupt education system, poor health services, police and judicial working. These forces collectively operate to perpetuate the underclass. This underclass constitutes Dark India". (Krishna Singh, 2009)

The novel gives the detailed accounts of the **Indian society—rural** as well as **urban** and its various facets. Laxmangarh, Gaya, Dhanbad, Delhi and Bangalore are generic, and represent the portrait of India. Poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, caste and culture conflict, superstition, dowry practice, economic disparity, Zamindari system, and exploitation of marginal farmers and landless labourers, rise of Naxalism, corrupt education system, poor health services, tax evading racket, embittered master-servant relationship, prostitution, weakening family structure, entrepreneurial success and its fallout etc. constitute the basic structure of Indian society in the novel which largely forms the Dark image of India.

The novel conveys how the poor remain underdeveloped in India through Balaram Halwai. For Halwai, there are two kinds of **underdevelopment** in India that lead to **inequality**: (1) the rich under develop the poor; and (2) the poor under develop each other. Both these kinds of "**the Rooster coop**" (TWT, 175), Halwai says, "Go to Old Delhi, behind the Jama Masjid, and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly colored roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other and sitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench—the stench of terrified, feathered flesh. On the wooden desk above this coop sits a grinning young butcher, showing off the flesh and organs of a recently chopped-up chicken, still oleaginous with a coating of dark blood. The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country." (TWT, 173-74)

In this **extended metaphor**, the young butcher represents the rich, while the hens and roosters represent the poor. Both the butcher and the chickens are aware that the one is profiting from

the life-blood of the other, but neither attempts to change the situation. The butcher is profiting too much from the situation to want to alter it. The chickens are fighting too much amongst themselves to be able to change it. This is how the **Rooster coop** phenomenon allows the rich to under develop the poor, and the poor to under develop themselves. The comparison of the rich to a human being — “the young butcher”—and the poor to animals—“pale hens and brightly coloured roosters”—is ironic and suggestive. The irony is that the literal act of killing the chickens, a rather cruel symbolic example of exploiting another for one's own benefit, is committed by a human being, a creature supposedly more intelligent, and more evolved than animals.

The suggestion in the **analogy** of the poor as chickens is that the poor are somehow akin to animals—they are less evolved, less intelligent than human beings—and thus it is their destiny to fatten the rich as labour in the same way that chickens feed human beings literally. Balram Halwai makes a strong case that the rich rely on the Rooster coop phenomenon to enrich themselves and further enslave the poor: “Never before in human history have so few owed so much to so many . . . A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 percent—as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way—to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse.” (TWT, 175-76) “Why does the Rooster Coop work? How does it trap so many millions of men and women so effectively? Secondly, can a man break out of the coop? What if one day, for instance, a driver took his employer's money and ran? What would his life be like? I will answer both for you, sir. The answer to the first question is that the pride and glory of our nation, the repository of all our love and sacrifice, the subject of no doubt considerable space in the pamphlet that the prime minister will hand over to you, *the Indian family*, is the reason we are trapped and tied to the coop. The answer to the second question is that only a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed—hunted, beaten, and burned alive by the masters—can break out of the coop. That would take no normal human being, but a freak, a pervert of nature. It would, in fact, take a White Tiger. You are listening to the story of a social entrepreneur, sir.” (TWT, 176-77)

In Balram's reasons for how and why the Rooster coop mentality works, we see also his reasons for how and why the poor under develop each other. Such underdevelopment takes the form of a deep sense of communal feeling with one's family and community, what Halwai short forms as “the Indian family.” (TWT, 176) In other words, it is a sense of ethics towards family and community. It is a form of ethics that values people as social and human beings, the antithesis of ethics in the mode

of **neoliberal globalization**, which values people, not as human beings, but as individual consumers and sources of labor. As with the earlier analogy of the butcher to the rich and the chickens to the poor, this comparison of a “social entrepreneur” to a “white tiger” is also revealing. To escape both the butcher's knife and the rooster cage, to escape these two simultaneous threats of being underdeveloped by the rich and by the poor, one must go against the norm, nature, even humanity. One must be “a freak,” “a pervert of nature”: one must not, indeed cannot, be a “normal” human being.”

**The education system** in the novel is not devoid of the corruption; rather it has been polluted by the so-called progressive democratic system. The teacher pocketed the government given mid-day meal fund sanctioned for the students and this malpractice is known to the people but they don't blame the teachers or the authorities. Nobody can expect “a man in a dung heap to smell sweet”. The life of underclass darkens when corrupt and defunct education system operates in the society. In Laxmangarh, there is a typical school teacher called, “big *Paan*-and spit Man” (TWT, 29), goes to sleep by noon, and drinks toddy in the school. Supply of free food to the school goes to the teacher who gives legitimate excuse for it —“he hadn't been paid his salary in six months”. (TWT, 33) Truck full of uniform that government had sent to school is not issued to the children, “but a week later they turned up for sale in the neighboring village”. (TWT, 33) The whole education system is governed by the “crowd of thugs and idiots” (TWT, 35), which Adiga calls “Jungle”. (TWT, 35)

Poor **health services** and non-implementation of government policies expose the rampant malpractices which collectively enhance the miseries of the poor. In Laxmangarh, there were three different foundation stones for a hospital, laid by three different politicians before three different elections. Balram's father died due to the lack of hospital and medical facilities. Medical services are shown as an object of political mockery and social stigma. The Great Socialist inaugurated Lohia Universal Free Hospital in view of election result. There is no doctor in the hospital, doctor seldom visits the hospital. In the hospital when ten rupees is given by someone to the ward boy, the information of doctors the payee got very easily. The post of the doctors remain always vacant—“Now, each time this post falls vacant, the great socialist makes an open auction of the vacant post. The going rate for this post is about four hundred thousand rupees these days” (TWT, 49).

While the novel moves from country to **city**, the whole world of underclass also migrates with their exploitation and sufferings. With the labourers working in the industrial set-up, taxi and auto drivers, servants, prostitutes, beggars, poor and

shivering lots hiding under flyovers, slum-dwellers, corrupt police, legal and administrative structure, unfriendly master-servant relationship underclass emerges. Big cities like Delhi and Bangalore witness both kinds of India.

Balram's journey from Laxmangarh to Dhanbad then Delhi and finally to Bangalore endorses that the socio-psychological condition of the underclass remains unchanged. Though the cities provide ample opportunities of job, social behaviour and psyche of the upper class is identical everywhere—whether it is a landlord or politician, police official, bureaucrat, upper caste people, richman, industrialist or entrepreneur. Everywhere underclass is trapped in Rooster Coop, struggling to come out of the cage. Balram is the conscience of underclass—their anger, frustration, protest and revenge, ready to adopt a new moral code of conduct to succeed in life. Murder of Ashok by Balram is the reaction of deep-rooted frustration of underclass experiencing the polarities between the upper class and lower class. Apart from these, pollution, hectic routine of life, harmful effects of mobile, impact of city culture etc. create new territories of Darkness in India

India is shown as an emerging **entrepreneurial power** in the world in the novel. Advancement in the field of science and technology, space, transportation, hotel industry, tourism, real estate, expansion of cities, mall culture, industries and outsourcing etc. characterize the image of India. But all these developmental activities depend on underclass with distinct identity. Auto and taxi drivers constitute a big fragment of underclass inhabiting in the cities. Balram is a true prototype of this class manifesting miseries of their life, humiliation, struggle, dreams and involvement in criminal and illegal activities. Balram as a chauffeur was hired by Stork, a village landlord for his son Ashok, daughter-in-law Pinky and their two Pomeranian dogs. From behind the Wheel of a Honda City, Balram first sees Delhi. The city is a revelation. Amid the cockroaches and call-centres, the 36,000,004 gods, the slums, the shopping malls and the crippling traffic jams, Balram's re-education begins. Under the conflict between two opposite thoughts to be a loyal son and servant or fulfill his desire to better himself, he devises a new morality at the heart of a new India. Drivers also carry out the work of a servant washing utensils, brooming the floors, cooking, massaging, scrubbing, lathering and drying the skin of dogs; they sell drugs, prostitutes and read with full enthusiasm *Murder Weekly* because, "a billion servants are secretly fantasizing about strangling their bosses" (TWT, 125).

**Corrupt police, legal and administrative** structure mark off another dark spot of shining India. Police masterminds the forced out confession to protect the rich men from the legal proceedings

and get huge money in lieu of that. The hit and run case which legally belongs to Pinky is shifted to Balram: "The jails of Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind the bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid middle-class masters. We have left the villages, but the masters still own us, body, soul, and arse" (TWT, 170). Even judges ignore to see forced confession, because they "are in the racket too. They take their bribe; they ignore the discrepancies in the case. And life goes on" (170). The close nexus between criminals, police and media persons is also exposed. Balram Halwai transformed into Ashok Sharma—a Bangalore based successful entrepreneur is confident that he is "one of those who cannot be caught in India" (TWT, 320).

The novel exposes to the **Modern India** with shifting values and no morals. In the era of **globalization**, everything became commodity where the bond of relationship reached in the position of commodity and everything is for sale. The family relationship is based upon the materialistic prosperity because the western culture injected the poison of decadence in Indian culture. The sex has polluted the brain of almost all the modern people. The master Ashok and his wife Pinky madam in their excited position behave 'like animals', the master "pushing his hand up and down her thigh". Even they don't care that they are in car where driver Balaram observes them in the mirror. This master is the embodiment of a debauchery for pursuing sex and after sex with the Nepali, Indian as well as with the Ukrainian whores without any inner satisfaction. The master of the novel through crime, bribery, debauchery, savage animalism has degraded all the civilized ways of life.

The viciousness of the so called modern rising and **shinning India** is in stark contrast to the value-based traditional India as Balram claimed, "To sum up- in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are **just two castes: Men with Big Bellies**, and '**Men with Small Bellies**. And only two destinies: **eat-or get eaten up**" (TWT, 64). The inevitable result is that due to disparity in income the rich grow richer and the poor turns poorer. Balram, reverses the role and becomes master like servant. He visits brothels and the red light areas imbibing Ashok's pleasure-loving obscenities and in a way satisfies his deep rooted grudge he carries against these upper classes.

**Political system and bureaucratic set up**, according to the novel refer to the darkest areas of our country which breed, "rottenness and corruption" (TWT, 50) in our society and hamper all developmental and welfare schemes. It restricts half of this country from achieving its potential. Most of the politicians are "**half-baked**. That's the whole tragedy of this country". (TWT, 10) The



story of Balram's emergence is the story of how a half-baked fellow is produced. Politics is the last refuge for scoundrels. Government doctors, entrepreneurs, tax payers, industrialists all have to befriend a minister and his sidekick to fulfill their vested interests. Mukesh and Ashok also bribe the minister to settle income tax accounts. Election, though we feel proud of glorious democracy of ours, are manipulated; power transfers from one hand to another but the common man's fate remains unchanged. Adiga considers, "Typhoid, Cholera and election fever the three main diseases of this country and the last one the worst". (TWT, 98) Voters discuss about the election helplessly as "eunuchs discussing the *Kama Sutra*". (TWT, 98) Money-bags, muscle power, police, strategic alignment of various factions and power to woo the underclass assure the victory in the political game. Balram reports: "I am India's most faithful voter, and I still have not seen the inside of a voting booth". (TWT, 102)

In the words of MQ Khan "Adiga forgets and perhaps deliberately overlooks the fact that the India he presents is not the whole of India nor the real India. All the rich people, all the entrepreneurs, all the politicians and, of course, all the rulers and ministers are cheats, dishonest, murderer and upstarts as painted by Adiga. But there are some good persons, good soul and well – meaning rulers who have a good deal of humanity to uphold faith, truth and honesty. Hence he brings out the whole of India. It may be Adiga's India, but it is certainly not everybody's India. The novel, as a whole, is not that great or successful, as it had been held, because a reader with an alert and sensitive mind feels rather disappointed and depressed for not finding what one usually expects from a work of art with all the artistic values and mature and universal vision." (M.Q. KHAN, *The White Tiger*: A Critique) Certainly it is not the whole of Indian or the real Indian. It is, at best, a work that holds up only one of the many aspects of India, i.e. its poverty, darkness and the low slum picture of India.

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Often critics like to appreciate what we usually term as the realistic picture, the naked truth and the sordid reality that novelists, authors or artists try to record in their literary works. Aravind Adiga, too, makes all attempts to show India with all its darkness. It is true that 'the black' has its own beauty, but the appeal and value of the black entirely depends on its complete veracity, authenticity and of course in the perfection of its expression. Analyzed from this angle, we find that apart from its sheer dark pictures of India, the novel lacks in its authenticity, complete and absolute truth as well as artistic mode and stylistic feature. In MQ Khan's words "looking through its dark canvas against which the entire plot of the novel has been drawn, one is immediately reminded of V.S. Naipaul and his novel like *An Area of Darkness* and many other novels on India, wherein he too paints the dark side of India. But great differences emerge between the two novelists. Although Naipaul's account appears as one of outsider's views on India, while Adiga's accounts becomes that of an insider's view on India, both the artists differ in their approach, treatment and stylistic expression of the subject. While Naipaul is an excellent artist par excellence both in his expression and narrative style, Adiga's expression is dull, drab and bereft of any stylistic features." (M.Q. KHAN, *The White Tiger*: A Critique)

To conclude, the novel does indeed give a bleak picture of India, but we all know this is not the only world that constitutes India. Not all politicians are corrupt, not all servants kill their masters, and not all entrepreneurs are murderers. However, one cannot overlook the agonies of the poor and the suffering to rise in life and break free from the darkness to move towards the light. In the process, how the simmering ulterior motives of these people are ready to surface is absolutely mind opening. The flabbergasting inner thoughts of the servant class as depicted by Adiga are quite illuminating to the readers.

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